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Article (Published Version)

Solvason, Carla, Webb, Rebecca and Sutton-Tsang, Samantha (2020) "What is left...?": the implications of losing maintained nursery schools for vulnerable children and families in England. *Children & Society*. pp. 1-15. ISSN 0951-0605

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‘What is left...?’: The implications of losing Maintained Nursery Schools for vulnerable children and families in England

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Funding information

TACTYC, Grant/Award Number: 18/19
0007

Abstract

This TACTYC funded research highlights the role that Maintained Nursery Schools (MNS) play in supporting families within areas of extreme social deprivation in the UK. Data collected through survey and interview demonstrated the positive impact that these schools have upon disadvantaged children and their families, providing a breadth and depth of ongoing care, against a backdrop of ongoing fiscal cuts and uncertainty. Often this provision was in lieu of the reported minimisation of other social services support for struggling families. We argue in this paper that the loss of these state institutions could be highly detrimental to the families that they currently support.

KEY WORDS

care, disadvantage, early years, families, Maintained Nursery Schools

INTRODUCTION

This article is the result of a research project funded by TACTYC and carried out by the authors in early 2019 which investigated the impact that the Maintained Nursery School (MNS) has upon the wider Early Years (EY) sector as well as their local communities in England. The MNS has a long history within the UK. Established over 100 years ago in urban and peri-urban areas they provide education and care to pre-school children, predominantly aged 3–5. They are legally required to have a head teacher with an early years teaching qualification, and a publicly accountable board of governors

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that reports to the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) in the same way as other statutory educational provision for 5- to 18-year-olds in the UK (Early Education, 2015).

We did not intend for our research into the MNS to produce statistic sets, such as those available in recent reports (see Bertram & Pascal, 2019; Early Education, 2018a; Paull & Popov, 2019). Instead, our aim was to depict the practitioners' own lived, everyday perceptions of their impact, recognising that there are areas that 'statistics cannot measure' (Silverman, 2001, p. 32). By collecting qualitative data the aim was to tell the stories of the nurseries through the practitioners' eyes, exploring their cultures and their values.

This research is set against a disconcerting backdrop. Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) appear to have all but disappeared from the mainstream political agenda in the UK (Early Education, 2014, 2015, 2018). The Effective Provision for Pre-School Education project (EPPE) by Sylva et al in 2004 provided evidence that instigated appreciation of the crucial role of EY education to peak. Unfortunately, since then political interest in this area has steadily waned. Meanwhile a parallel decline has been seen in family support services.

During the New Labour period of government (1997–2010) the remit of ECEC expanded and spearheaded social and economic, public and private initiatives designed to eradicate child poverty (Simpson et al., 2017). A joined up approach to child development and care which took account of the whole family unit was perpetuated through government policy such as *Every Child Matters* (DfE, 2004) and public money was readily invested into children's centres (designed specifically to bring a number of family services under one roof) in urban areas of deprivation. This flow of funding diminished after the financial crash of 2008–2009 and government policies, steered by economic priorities, emerged. These policies stressed value for money as the dominant framing of public service provision and numbers of children's centres declined dramatically (Smith, Sylva, Smith, Sammons, & Omonigho, 2018). At this point in time families in the UK experiencing poverty and deprivation have not become extinct, but much of their public sector support has (Simpson et al., 2017). And this is where many MNSs have responded, filling the public sector social care gap.

Embarking upon this research our remit was to investigate the impact of MNSs upon the ECEC sector. We were particularly interested in practitioners' training, skills and continued professional development, as it is well documented that staff in the MNS have significantly higher qualifications than other EY provider types (Paull & Popov, 2019). However, what we subsequently learnt about the nature of this provision through our interactions with these settings, went well beyond accounts of qualifications. We discovered staff with a highly visceral human care and commitment to families within their communities. We talked with professionals who were passionately dedicated to the children who they worked with, often to the detriment of their own home lives; practitioners who worked extra, unpaid hours every day and every week; practitioners who took on second jobs to enable them to pay their own bills whilst continuing a job that they loved and practitioners who bought nursery resources from their own wages. Additionally, in the light of the reduction of Local Authority (LA) funding and support for the MNS in the areas of the UK that we researched, we found practitioners who were highly apprehensive about the fate of the families for whom they felt responsible.

Recent research documents the MNS as playing an essential role, offering quality early education and care within areas of high need and deprivation (Bertram & Pascal, 2019; Solvason, Webb, & Sutton-Tsang, 2020). In this article we focus upon just one facet of MNS's work; the relationships built with, and the support offered to, the parents and families of pre-school children who access their service. (Please note that throughout this paper the terms 'parents' and 'families' are used; these terms are not limited to those who are biologically related to the child, but to any adult with the responsibility for the care and welfare of the child). We argue that the support that MNSs provide is a lifeline for

many families in need in the UK. Consequently, to risk the loss of these settings, through inadequate funding, could have wide-ranging societal ramifications beyond the traditional notions of ECEC as improving educational outcomes for individual children. To this end, our review of literature places the MNS within a wider social and political context, before focusing on an analysis and interpretation of the data.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Early education

Despite a retreat from the political and media spotlight, research evidence continues to highlight the impact of ECEC on children's long-term outcomes; from their education, to their social mobility success, to their longer term employment (Gambaro, Stewart, & Waldfogel, 2013). The EPPE project (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 2004) found that children who attended a pre-school setting in the UK demonstrated higher levels of cognition and improved social behavioural outcomes upon entry to primary school than children who did not. Yet despite this, and more recent research emphasising similar findings (Hall et al., 2013; Maisey, Speight, Marsh, & Philo, 2013), ECEC services in England have remained selective and fragmented. Lewis and West (2013) explains how, whilst European countries were developing comprehensive childcare strategies in the 1970s, it took Britain until 1998 to formulate these. Lewis relates this to the government ministers who were making strategic decisions being reluctant to let go of the idea of the breadwinning father and the mother in the home; despite the numbers of mothers in work in the UK almost doubling between 1961 and 1981. This reluctance to fully embrace the concept of universal ECEC in the UK, has caused a limited view of early care to persist, restricting it as a source with which to combat poverty and provide support to the most needy (ibid).

MNSs enable children in deprived areas of the UK to access free, basic, pre-school education (Thangarajah, 2018). They are LA funded and led by a specialist early years head teacher and qualified practitioners in order to provide quality early education through a holistic approach (Early Education, 2015). (It should be noted on referencing this source that the Early Education charity, established in 1923, are firm supporters of the MNS remit, due to their shared values that 'A secure, safe and happy childhood is important in its own right' (Early Education, 2020). As such they have funded a number of research projects exploring the role of the MNS and are, perhaps, more partisan than other researchers).

The remit of the MNS is to 'close the gap', to enable the disadvantages of poverty to be overcome through education. New Labour's (1997–2010) 'Third Way' approach to tackling childhood and family poverty through the tighter integration of private and public sectors, included a focus on encouraging parents of pre-school children back into paid work. Although the government encouraged increased employment, the traditional views held by ministers concerning motherhood and work (already mentioned) meant that there was actually very little development in state funded childcare; as a result numerous private, voluntary and independent (PVI) childcare providers emerged to cater for this need through a predominantly marketised model (McDowell Clark & Baylis, 2012). Despite the consistently rising demand for quality childcare in the UK as the numbers in employment continue to rise (Lewis & West, 2013), budget cuts to Local Authorities have seen the disappearance of a third of all MNSs since 1986. There are currently just 392 (Paull & Popov, 2019, p.8) with those surviving feeling at constant risk of closure due to unremitting fiscal pressures (Early Education, 2018b).

Maintained Nursery Schools and families

MNSs provide professional, quality and free pre-school education for those children most at risk of underachievement in the years leading up to, and including, statutory schooling (Bertram & Pascal, 2019; Nutbrown, 2012; Paull & Popov, 2019). One in seven children in the MNS receive Early Years Pupil Premium funding (support put in place for disadvantaged children) compared to 1 in 30 in a PVI setting (Paull & Popov, 2019). Early Education (2015, p. 11) highlighted that one of the key differences between the MNS and other ECEC providers in the UK was the extent to which they supported families through parenting programmes, providing outreach and a 'joined up approach'. This, Callanan, Anderson, Haywood, Hudson, and Speight (2017, p.52) argue, provides effective learning for the child within the family, through a holistic care approach and through an 'open culture' of trust and respect, enabling accessibility between practitioners and parents.

A recent report from Lynch and McDonough (2018) suggests that high-quality interactions between EY practitioners and pre-school children are crucial to the fulfilment of a government agenda that moves families away from longer term state welfare dependency. This was the ambition of the UK Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government (2010–2014) when they made decisions regarding the further professionalization of the workforce within all ECEC settings, generating new professional qualifications. A raft of research suggests that having exposure to high-quality ECEC has a substantial impact on children from disadvantaged areas, both within the maintained and the PVI sector (Hall et al., 2013; Maisey et al., 2013; Smith et al., 2009; Sylva et al., 2004) and on those children who exist 'on the fringes of social care without support' (Early Education, 2018a, p.2). However, when Cathy Nutbrown carried out an independent review of ECEC in England in 2012 only 5 of her 19 recommendations for further professionalization of the workforce were actually accepted. She lamented that:

...yet again, babies, toddlers, young children, and their families, have to be content with something different, something that is 'not quite' the same in status...yet again...the thousands of women and the small number of men who dedicate energy, intellect and commitment to providing the best they can to the youngest children...are to content themselves with something less than their colleagues working with older children.

(Nutbrown, 2013, p.8)

Further to this she noted that this is to be done 'in a context of diminishing support...and increased inspection' (ibid.), which is particularly significant to this research.

A key feature of the MNS is that it acts as a hub for families within its local community. Over the last decade or so, the MNS has continued to provide for the multi-faceted public service needs of the pre-school child in England (Early Education, 2015, p. 12) with a number assuming the responsibilities of former children's centres. Smith et al. (2018: p. 3) explain that children's centres, established by the Labour government in 1998, were focused within the same areas of disadvantage as MNSs; combining 'a multitude of services designed to improve the life chances of young children' with 'a focus on the poorest families'. Children's centres' principal focus was early intervention for the entire family rather than the specific focus of early education. However, under the English coalition Government, between 2010 and 2018, funding for children's centres fell by 64% (Smith et al., 2018) causing extensive closures. Our findings suggest that this is where the lines for service users became blurred, as families in need increasingly looked to MNSs for the same holistic provision and support.

Paull and Popov (2019, p. 56) give a detailed overview of the extent of additional and specialist services that many MNSs provide in the UK, using *The Early Years Providers Cost Study* (2018) as their source. The broad range of examples that they present, from the safeguarding of vulnerable children to

networking with other social services, illustrates the fundamental role that the MNS plays in offering care to families; many aspects of which would previously have been provided by other types of family and welfare support. MNS network links include those with: health services, early intervention teams, community services, housing, local schools and local charities (Paull & Popov, 2019). Through innovative, ‘extra-professional’ collaborations, staff in the MNS liaise with a range of experts and services and have increasingly achieved a reputation, not only for their provision to families in poverty, but also for expertise in supporting children with complex range of health and educational needs (Mathers and Smees, 2014).

A QUALITY PROVISION IN CRISIS

Despite growing fiscal constraints, the MNS has continued to find ways to ensure quality educational provision. This is evident through Paull and Popov’s (2019, p. 10) research which found that almost two-thirds (63%) of MNSs were rated as ‘Outstanding’ by Ofsted compared to just 18% of other provider types. The correlation between high-quality graduates in MNSs and outstanding Ofsted ratings is evident (Mather and Smees, 2014), however, in addition to this, Bertram and Pascal (2019, p.2) highlight the vital role of the MNS in supporting the ‘basic life requirements’ of families in their local community; a role which goes unrecognised by any formal means. MNSs were seen to provide support, nurture and care in a range of areas, from housing, to accessing food banks, to debt and drug management (ibid).

A report compiled by seven UK local authority MNSs (Early Education, 2018a, p. 13) recognised this wide range of roles that MNSs adopted, including family support, adult skills for life and work and the development of active home–school learning links. The success of these sources of support was measured not only by higher educational outcomes but also by fewer referrals to support services as the children progressed through their statutory schooling. Paull and Popov (2019, p. 12) conclude that the MNS offers a greater range and quantity of additional and specialist services than *any other* ECEC provider in the PVI sector. Nonetheless, and significantly, the *Early Years Education Report* (2018) suggests that fulfilling this wider care role for the support of families may be in jeopardy if the future funding of the MNS, beyond 2020, is not resolved with some urgency. Through their study, Paull and Popov (2019, p. 76) found that a quarter of MNSs have either a structural deficit (a deficit beyond recovery, where the school is deemed unviable), or a significant deficit (a deficit requiring intensive intervention and focused support to recover); and that a further 46% of maintained nurseries are in a vulnerable position, indicating that they are either quickly going through their fiscal reserves, losing significant pupil numbers (due to not being able to fund their support) or moving to the brink of a financial deficit. This extremely vulnerable position has the potential to be devastating for the children and families who rely on the range of provision offered by their local MNSs.

METHODOLOGY

The evidence presented within this paper is part of a wider data set, which grew from a mixed methods approach (Bryman, 2016) to evidencing the role of the MNS in shaping the current terrain of EY education provision within England. The data comprised of survey responses from 60 leaders and 55 practitioners (from a sample of 200 settings, 100 in the Midlands and 100 in the South and South-East, including London areas of England), 14 in-depth interviews, 6 setting visits and a focus group interview with 7 sector leaders. TACTYC funded this research and BERA (2018) *Ethical Guidelines* were followed meticulously throughout the process.

The survey was the first stage of the data collection and sought respondents' views about perceived developments and challenges that had been encountered by both practitioners and leaders over the previous year. One of the purposes of the survey was to allow for tabulation and analysis (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011, p. 260) that could then produce topics and themes that would shape our 'structured conversations' (Cannold, 2001, p. 179) with MNS leaders. Consequently, the interview questions focused upon the key areas of: what it meant to be a MNS; how leaders felt their MNS impacted upon children, families and communities and how confident they felt about maintaining their levels of service within the short, medium and longer term.

The interviews with leaders allowed for the generation of data that emerged from the particularity of the social situation, which was context-related and context-rich (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 219). The interviewees narrated stories about situations and circumstances in order to locate what they had to say within their own sense-making of a longer history of events (Becker, 1998). Their responses captured a wealth of professional knowledge, often accrued over many years, not only about the field of ECEC educational practice, pedagogy and leadership; but also about the diverse families and community contexts that the nurseries served.

Our analysis of the interviews employed a staged approach, adopted from Denscombe (2010), which involved familiarisation with the data through ongoing listening and transcription, and then categorisation of this into broader themes, noting connections and relationships. This process benefitted from the scrutiny of all three researchers in order to generate some wider coding reliability, creating richly textual 'thick descriptions' (Geertz, 1973) of the interview texts. The selection of data presented below is a product of this ongoing and iterative analysis process; it builds and tells a story of the idea of 'family' as an integral conceptual, practical and 'values' framework, as relayed by MNS leaders. The majority of comments used come from leader interviews, but, occasionally, allusion is also made to the qualitative responses received through survey, by both leader and practitioner; this is indicated as and where appropriate.

FINDINGS

It wasn't just giving that child a nursery place, it never can be ... it's that five minutes in the morning, that smile on the door...when that mom's in a ratty mood, or the dad, and I say 'oooh, he's been ever so good today, he's done this this and this.' Sometimes I make it up, because I can see the change. Because everyone loves their kid really, really. To hear something positive ... And we can, it's easy to say something positive, isn't it?

MNS Leader

An enduring theme throughout our data was that it is impossible to consider children outside the context of their families and because of this it was imperative that practitioners develop supportive relationships with parents. All of the practitioners with whom we spoke premised their work upon an assumption that children need stability, and that stability begins with their home situation. If practitioners perceived that a parent was unable to offer their child a steady home environment, then they would assist them, as a matter of priority. This leader explained the concept of shared responsibility by saying that: '*we support parents to best support our children*'. When care proved too heavy a burden for some parents then practitioners offered their help. They provided a safety net.

A parent's capacity to fulfil the basic needs of their child was never taken-for-granted by those we interviewed. One leader explained: '*Some of our kids, one of the first things I say is "where did you*

*sleep last night?" Most of our fundraising goes on feeding our kids'. Our respondents recognised that if the child's basic needs of food, shelter and care were not first met, for whatever reason, then educating them meaningfully became almost impossible. This meant that despite the practitioners' recognised role as educationalists, their *duty of care* was not an optional extra, it was a necessity.*

Dwindling support in Local Authority family services

Our data suggest that a key factor in the MNS evolving as a source of family care and support has been the demise of children's centres. Some nurseries that we visited had actually taken residence within the building of a previous children's centre. Additionally, some of the larger settings continued to run a number of the services previously associated with the multi-disciplinary provision of the children's centre. This leader summed up the need for her team to develop multi-faceted and interdisciplinary skills, with '*Because everything else disappeared in this area*'. She added:

We are essentially doing the family support, now. We are leading on early help plans, we are supporting parents... The stuff that I would have passed over to a family support worker... anything, we are now having to learn about housing, anything. I've just printed off a load of documents for court for a parent who's trying to get sole legal custody... So, yeah, you are doing stuff, going 'oh, I don't know about that, but I'll Google it and try and find out'.

In response to the growing needs of families, a number of MNSs took it upon themselves to develop their skill-set, to be able to offer their families some of the support that they would have previously received from a multi-disciplinary team. One leader described how children's centres in her area had reduced from four to one, and that: '*the needs of the families are so huge*'. The same leader went on to explain that the closure of children's centres caused them, as a group of ECEC professionals, to go through a steep learning curve. She explained: '*They do come to us. Even after the children have left, you know, if they are in crisis, they do come back to us because we used to be a children's centre as well... They still see us as that*'. This raises the important question that if MNSs are forced to close, where will these families turn for support?

Identifying family needs

So they [the children] come in, and because we've got the skill and the expertise, we can say ... within a week or two of having them, they need help with their speech and language, we know that they need help with their personal and social development... It could be that they need help with their emotions. And then it could be that, 'Oh, goodness me, that Mommy needs a bit of help as well'.

MNS leader

Unlike many schools, where parents are expected to submissively comply to the remit of a 'good parent' by fulfilling what school requires of them whilst remaining unobtrusive (Solvason, Cliffe, & Bailey, 2019), MNS educators recognise that the health and well-being of the parent and the child are inextricably linked. Therefore, a relationship with both is needed. This did not manifest itself as pressure

put upon parents to fulfil educational aims, in fact, this was entirely absent from our data; instead MNSs practitioners had just one key expectation for parents, that they provide a safe and secure home. Because of this, the relationships that practitioners fashioned with parents were built upon a genuine shared goal, the holistic *care* of the child, rather than the specific academic *success* of the child. (The significant educational progress that came as a *result* of this solid foundation is explored in more detail in our full report, 2020). This meant that, where feasible, the pastoral needs of parents were taken up by nursery staff. For example, one leader commented that many of the parents were ‘*very socially isolated*’, therefore finding space to *listen* to parents was something that she appreciated as crucial. Other practitioners, through survey data, made similar comments, which included:

- Parents need to know that if they come here to ask for support, actually, they will be listened to.
- And the parents that just might need to talk to someone, we are always there for them. It's an open-door policy.
- I was talking to a Mommy, last week, there was something going on between her and her ex-partner. And we took time out to have her in the office and have a chat to her and see if there were things that we could do to help support her.
- ...they just want someone that will listen to them; that will take them seriously, rather than just being fobbed off.

A leader explained how important it was that parents felt valued and not judged. And although we amassed hundreds of pages of data littered with cases of parental poverty, child neglect, mental instability, homelessness and unemployment, there were no data accruing *blame* towards parents for the situations in which they found themselves. The data suggest, instead, that practitioners and leaders took a pragmatic approach to issues as they arose, founded upon the logic that family difficulties would negatively impact upon the child, and that help should be offered.

Many leaders commented on the importance of finding ways to provide consistent and ongoing support to families, as other public services disappeared or became further fractured. They placed great significance upon building trusting relationships with families that were sustained over time. Some practitioners, we were told, would see generations of families come through their doors. This leader explained how these enduring relationships could provide sanctuary for families:

Some of these families are bringing their third or fourth child and they're still being able to see the same teachers. Within the space. And they may have been gone for three or four years, they may be bringing a grandchild back, but for them to come in and see that we're still here...that gives them the security and the trust in us to be able to bond.

A number of leaders were keen to stress that once a positive relationship had been established with a family, it should *never* be taken for granted; it had to be fastidiously nurtured. This leader explained that it was about being ‘*utterly reliable ...you always do it consistently*’. She added ‘*because if you if you get it wrong, once, actually, you've blown it. ... You have to be utterly consistent*’. Another leader stressed, ‘*it doesn't matter if it's a busy day or not a busy day, you never don't respond , you never don't hear*’. Because for so many of these families, MNS practitioners felt, there was no one else available to listen.

One leader clarified that being available to parents was not just a case of ‘*being nice*’, rather it was about modelling the ‘*non- negotiable of holding the needs of children in mind*’. Practitioners shared how important it was to model putting the needs of the child first. Sometimes this could be difficult for parents to accept, as the leader below explained:

I mean, don't get me wrong. We get shouted out, we get sworn at. We are just real with them. I say to them, come on, you're obviously very angry. But I don't think we need to be like this. Come on, let's calm down and sort it out.

What was consistently evident within the data was that even during times of conflict, parents were treated with empathy, care and respect. The safety net remained firmly in place.

Prevention rather than cure

Situated within largely urban areas, the needs of families that attend MNSs are diverse and sometimes complex. The challenges presented in the data ranged from relatively simple learning needs or behavioural issues to serious cases of child protection. One leader mused how much easier it would be for her nursery to have a recognised source of family support in situ, to help deal with issues as they arose, in lieu of the reduction of family support services. She shared: *'I'd love to be able to sort of say to parents "shall we just do a little bit... have somebody come out?"'*

Another leader discussed how her nursery offered 30 hrs of childcare to children on the safeguarding register who were still living at home, at a cost to the setting. The leader explained that this was their way of supporting struggling parents and their children in their locale. During a fieldwork visit, she elaborated: *'we've got that little lad we were looking at in tiny nursery ... Terrible, terrible, sad child protection. But actually, for him to be here every day is a present to him and his family'*. This overlap of care, education and specialist support services was consistent throughout the data.

An unanticipated topic that arose a number of times during leader interviews was the matter of homelessness. There were several recounts of nursery leaders accompanying parents to local housing offices, or even individually funding safe overnight accommodation for a fleeing family; as this leader explained:

If somebody is homeless, due to domestic violence, sometimes due to other issues. Sometimes we've had to go sit with them, at the housing office. Which, I mean, it's a stretch to be honest, on resources. But you can't not, in all good conscience. There was one particular family, initially it was me, and then obviously, we've taken it from a safeguarding budget, we've actually paid for them to stay somewhere, for the night. Because social housing couldn't offer them anything, all the refuges were full, all the charities were full.

Similarly one leader reported that the need for and use of food banks was *'massively on the rise'*, and she went on to share how she and her practitioners had assisted families through the complicated process of accessing them.

Parent mental health was also considered a growing concern, within one local authority in particular. As such, MNS leaders felt obligated to take action to help. This leader explained:

...sometimes the support is to do with their children. But sometimes, it's the parents who we will need to refer to ...mental health services, to signpost them in the right direction. We'll print off bus routes for them.

Another leader attributed the *'massive'* problems that they were encountering within mental health to the disappearance of a range of support services, including mental health, health visiting and postnatal support. She went on to explain how this could then impact upon the child:

We've got an awful lot more moms with more significant mental health issues. It's not just postnatal depression, it's quite severe postnatal depression that no one's picked up... We are getting the children showing the symptoms ...

MNS leaders shared that they were well placed to recognise warning signs within families and to step-in before problems worsened. As one leader put it, she could see when *'the wheels are getting wobbly'*. Another leader explained:

We're a prevention, rather than a cure. I mean, we have these very hard cases, child protection cases and the kids get taken off them, and they need to. But just before that, is that bit where you're coming up to the cliff, and you haven't quite jumped off? Yeah, because of the relationships, you can stop that jumping off the cliff.

Several leaders described the challenge of demonstrating *impact* in such cases, as this leader shared: *'I can't say that if we hadn't intervened there, she'd have been battered to death, killed. It's the truth. But ... We can't prove it because it was stopped, we stopped it'*. Similarly, another leader explained how providing an emergency placement for a child with behaviour difficulties (who had been excluded from a number of PVI settings) was necessary for the well-being of the family as a wider unit. The single mother of this incident, was in danger of losing her job if the child did not secure a nursery place. This potential outcome, the leader explained, may have *'just cascade[d] their tower of cards'*. By offering the excluded child a place at their nursery, this leader and her staff had potentially prevented a difficult situation from turning into a crisis for the family. However, no mechanism or reporting format existed to recognise the substantial implications of this and many other simple, day-to-day actions taken to support families. The concern of this article is what happens when these unrecorded and uncelebrated interventions no longer occur? What happens when the MNS safety net is taken away?

A service in crisis

I worry for the short and long term outcomes of children and families, if maintained nurseries cannot continue to provide this much needed support.

MNS Leader

It is impossible to discuss the ways that the MNS supports its local community without also acknowledging that the responses were saturated with evidence that the MNS had reached crisis point. One practitioner explained how guilty she felt that time previously spent reflecting upon children's individual needs, was now spent on the nursery *'finding ways to survive'*. After coping adeptly with ongoing funding cuts over previous years, through expert, strategic leadership and a great amount of goodwill, many practitioners and leaders shared that they had now accepted that their setting was on the brink of closure. Despite numerous instances of self-sacrifice, settings were now stretched beyond breaking point. Through their survey responses this leader and practitioner shared their views about the injustice of the situation:

Staff and Leaders in MNS are genuinely in the job for the good of the children, often to the detriment of their working hours and budgets.

MNS leader

Those practitioners tasked with giving the most vulnerable children a solid foundation to improve social mobility are paid the lowest wages with many taking on a second job or claiming benefits to top up their wages to a living wage.

MNS Practitioner

What held substantial affective resonance with the researchers was the way that the practitioners and leaders who responded, when faced with the potential closure of their setting, appeared less concerned with their own financial stability, and more apprehensive about the future of their nursery's children and families. The dedication shown by MNS practitioners and leaders in much of the data, goes far beyond the boundaries of a fixed and static definition of educational *professionalism*, extending, rather, to a more every day and broader human understanding of commitment and an ethic of care for others. This was captured in this practitioner's apprehension when she asked a researcher rhetorically: *'Where will the vulnerable children and families go if maintained nurseries are unable to continue to provide this support?'*

DISCUSSION

Recognising the parent as the child's first educator (Vygotsky, 1978) and working in partnership with parents and families has long been championed as a staple of effective EY education. It has been embedded within national educational policy frameworks in the UK for well over a decade (for example, DCSF, 2008; DfE, 2004) and repeatedly recognised and regarded seriously within research (Callanan et al., 2017; Early Education, 2015; Lynch & McDonough, 2018; Sylva et al., 2004). But this research highlights something that is rarely seen in 'parent partnership' research. Our data paint a picture of practitioners working respectfully and sensitively *with and for* parents as a genuine and fundamental aspect of ECEC provision. It presents dedication that is unyielding, forming the basis of trusting relationships, created with the sole aim of improving the experiences and the life chances of the child and the family.

Callanan et al. (2017, p.52) touched upon this, with what they termed an 'open culture' between the home and the MNS, but the sustained and genuine dialogue with parents that our participants described seemed to go further. Our data suggest that MNS practitioners expect neither passive obedience (Solvason et al., 2019) nor the compliant behaviour of the 'good parent' (Haines Lyon, 2018) with the aim of achieving standard academic accomplishment. The picture of parent–practitioner relationships pieced together through our data, was not about parents formally educating their children at home (Sylva, 2004); instead it was based upon the parents', and as a result the child's, happiness and well-being. Our data suggest that MNSs function upon the premise that the child is part of the family unit, therefore any input by the nursery into supporting to the parents' health is an investment in the child. As one leader phrased it 'happy parents, equals happy children'. The prevailing aims of the MNS leaders that we spoke with focused upon meeting the well-being needs of the child, as described by Maslow (1943), first and foremost. The practitioners and leaders involved in this research shared their belief that by ensuring the children in their settings were experiencing the basic human comforts of food, shelter and loving care, they then would then have the best chance of teaching them effectively and our full report, Solvason et al., 2020, explores how successful they were in this.

Nutbrown (2012, p. 14) found that 'the biggest influence on the quality of early education and care is its workforce'. But what is rarely asserted is the range of ways in which these variously qualified practitioners make an impact; perhaps because their empathic capabilities and competencies extend beyond the quantitative forms of measurement that are narrowly used to judge educational and care success in the UK. Our research evidence suggests that many MNSs do, in fact, achieve outstanding

educational results, but not as a result of practitioner qualifications or a focus on specific learning outcomes. Rather the root of this success appears to be attentively listening to the needs of children and families and providing supportive care and direction where needed. The type of meaningful interventions, that Campbell-Barr, Lavelle, and Wickett (2012) argue go unrecorded and, as a result, unvalued. Like Campbell-Barr et al. (2012, p.868) we argue that there is a 'desperate need for more qualitative approaches' to measuring not only the outcomes but the *processes* experienced by young children in their settings; in order 'to generate new narratives, as opposed to pre-determined ones and narratives that are located in their social context'.

Our data suggest that there is a strong link between the extended family support being offered by MNSs and the demise of wider public service provision in England. It is important to remember that almost half of maintained nurseries are found in the most deprived, urban areas (Paull & Popov, 2019, p. 9) because our data suggest that MNS practitioners often viewed themselves as the final line of support for families in times of crisis. As a result of this responsibility, many MNS practitioners had adeptly assumed the multi-professional, extended roles traditionally found in a children's centre, operating as a 'hub' and point of contact in the ways captured in the 2015 report of Early Education.

CONCLUSION

Perhaps it is the position of the MNS through time and urban space that makes it uniquely located to resist Pavlovian responses to target-driven educational agendas; and to focus instead upon useful and practical ways to support struggling families in situations of social and economic distress. Throughout our interviews with MNS leaders not once was judgement placed on parents or families for the situations in which they found themselves. Rather, families' material and emotional needs were heard, respected and responded to, wherever possible; as long as the help provided was judged to be in the best interests of the child. Our research revealed the wealth of knowledge that the MNS has accrued over their 100 year history of supporting the education and care of children, but also paying attention to the children's wider family context and needs. The leaders and practitioners that we interviewed demonstrated empathic, proactive and responsive specialist expertise in a range of 'softer skills' that, it would appear, made an immeasurable difference to the circumstances and everyday lived experiences of many of the families that the MNSs worked with. Yet these specific attributes of nursery practitioners are persistently overlooked by a myopic political focus upon an idea of educational 'professionalism' in the UK, which sets universal targets that disregard diverse culture and community contexts, and, more importantly, the needs of families and children (Campbell-Barr et al., 2012).

The MNSs in our study were committed to providing for the families with whom they work, sometimes at the expense of their personal, beyond work, lives. Within a denuded fiscal landscape, MNS leaders and practitioners have continued to find creative ways to make funds stretch, to fill gaps and to generate new funding streams. Painfully aware of their role as the last remaining safety net, the practitioners that we spoke with were resolute in their aim to offer some consistency to families that had repeatedly experienced rejection, failure and times of desperation. The knowledge, professionalism and passion of the MNS leaders was reflected in the rapidity with which many had developed savvy business skills, but this was not enough. During interviews, we frequently posed questions about the sustainability of the business models they described to us. In response many settings shared that they were reaching an 'end', where limited funds could no longer be stretched to meet all needs. As one leader explained, *'there is literally, no more slack left and we are at breaking point'*.

Our qualitative findings suggest that the wealth of knowledge and professionalism found within the MNS workforce should not be further denuded and treated as something *less than* (Nutbrown, 2013),

but instead, held in high esteem, cherished and protected as a vital resource for those families facing the most challenging circumstances. Through recognising the extreme lengths that MNSs travel in order to care for and educate the disadvantaged child within the context of the family and the community, we hope that we have added to the body of evidence suggesting that they be protected as a source of stability and rejuvenation, particularly in the uncertain years that lie ahead for many families with young children.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank TACTYC for enabling this research, for allowing us the freedom to identify our own methods and foci and for their ongoing support during the process. But even more importantly we would like to thank the Maintained Nursery School practitioners and leaders who willingly sacrificed time in their extremely busy lives to share their views with us. We were humbled by the incredible work that they are doing and hope that we can do it justice in our writing.

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How to cite this article: Solvason C, Webb R, Sutton-Tsang S. ‘What is left...?’: The implications of losing Maintained Nursery Schools for vulnerable children and families in England. *Child Soc.* 2020;00:1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1111/chso.12391>